Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications:

Inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population

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1. There is an abundance of anecdotal and some supporting scientific evidence for widespread declines in koala populations. Many koala populations close to urban areas have become extirpated in the last 20-30 years;

2. Whilst the impacts of habitat loss, disease and dog attack/predation are considered to be the primary causes of koala declines, the relative importance of each within and between populations is not well understood and has not been effectively or objectively measured;

3. There are a number of dogmas relating to disease in koalas that are untested, probably untrue, but yet widely accepted:
    a. That the stress of habitat loss and urbanization is a significant factor in disease prevalence and severity;
    b. That chlamydiosis and other diseases are just a "normal part of being a koala";
    c. That chlamydial disease has been affecting the koala population at an unchanged level for thousands of years;
    d. That disease is unlikely to cause the extinction of koalas;

4. The koala retrovirus has the potential to be one of the most significant factors in the severity and prevalence of serious disease in koalas, and yet the funding allocated to better understanding it has been pitiful. It is our opinion that this virus may be as devastating to koalas as the Tasmanian devil facial tumour disease in devils or chytrid fungus disease in frogs. Both have received orders of magnitude more funding than has research on the koala retrovirus. It is now known to be present in the Victorian and Kangaroo Island populations, whose poor genetic diversity may make them more susceptible.

5. As a consequence of the poor understanding of disease impacts in koalas at the population level, there is no serious plan for managing the impacts: so they remain unmitigated.

6. Studies to date in SEQ show that around 60% of breeding age female koalas are infertile, mainly as a result of chlamydiosis;
7. The State environment agencies, particularly DERM in Queensland, seem incapable of appropriately responding to the issue of koala population decline.

8. Habitat is not effectively protected.

9. Koalas are not effectively protected from preventable causes of death:
    a. Death or injury during vegetation clearing (this is a significant cause of loss of koalas);
    b. Death on roads and rail;
    c. Death or injury by domestic dogs;

10. Both the federal government's Koala Strategy, and the numerous State planning regulations and other statutes have failed, and continue to fail, to mitigate the major threats to koala survival.

Both Jo and I would be happy to make representations to the Senate Committee in person if required on our areas of expertise: koala disease prevalence, impacts and management.